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SUBJECT: ERITREA - HUMANITARIAN UPDATE

REF: Asmara 00398

Introduction and Summary

1. USAID/OFDA Regional Advisor (RA) Georgianna Platt traveled to Eritrea June 17-29, 2006 to meet with U.N. agencies, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), OFDA implementing partners and staff of the US Embassy Humanitarian Affairs Unit (HAU) to assess the overall humanitarian situation and impact of the ongoing drought in the Horn of Africa region. The RA also visited a USAID/OFDA funded water project implemented by UNICEF Eritrea in Northern Red Sea Region and its planned Community-based Therapeutic Feeding Center (CTC) for severely malnourished children in Massawa.

2. The operating environment for UN agencies and NGOs in Eritrea remains challenging. While about half of the 32 local and international NGOs passed the rigorous process of registration imposed by the Ministry of Labor and Human Welfare (MLHW) in May 2005, they still encounter operational, administrative and financial obstacles and travel restrictions imposed by the GSE. Three international NGOs that were initially registered in 2005 had their registrations rescinded in March, and were asked to cease activities and close their offices immediately. Reasons for this action were not provided to the NGOs.

3. The drought that has affected other Horn of Africa countries has had a detrimental impact on household food security throughout Eritrea. Contrary to government claims of a bumper harvest in late 2005, UN and NGOs say the 2005 harvest was at best average, and provided only a three-to-four month supply of cereals. The much needed December coastal rains completely failed causing considerable livestock loss there due to lack of pasture and water reserves while the long rains of June and July are off to a slow start. All general food distributions by the U.N. World Food Program (WFP) and NGOs were stopped by the GSE in September 2005 and targeted food distributions were stopped by April 2006.

4. Nutrition surveys conducted in February 2006 by the U.N. Children's Fund (UNICEF) show worsening malnutrition rates, a proxy

indicator of the general food security situation. (The GSE will not allow multi-sector household food security assessments by the U.N. and NGOs). A much anticipated food-for-work (FFW) scheme to be organized by the MLHW to replace general food distributions never materialized, instead, the government is selling the 94,000 MT of commodities provided by donors to WFP and NGOs to finance a cash-for-work (CFW) scheme. U.N. agencies and NGOs met with describe high food prices, limited food availability, poor terms of trade, low livestock prices and an overall worsening food security situation.

15. The USAID/DCHA Humanitarian Affairs Unit (HAU) staff at the US Embassy are working to facilitate USAID/FFP's portfolio closeout, monitor OFDA funded partner activities, and monitor and assess general humanitarian conditions in the country by liaising with government ministries, the U.N. and NGOs. New travel restrictions by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) on embassy staff travel outside Asmara is making it difficult for HAU, embassy and temporary duty (TDY) staff to effectively determine the humanitarian situation in the country.

16. OFDA recommends continued engagement with UN agencies, NGOs and the GSE; and funding for water, food security, nutrition, health and coordination if disaster funding is available. End Introduction and Summary.

Humanitarian Affairs Unit - US Embassy, Asmara

17. HAU staff at the US Embassy in Asmara are facilitating the closeout of Food for Peace's program portfolio (with NGOs Catholic Relief Services (CRS), WFP and Mercy Corps). The unit also provides oversight to USAID/OFDA funded programs implemented by UNICEF and CRS, and assesses the humanitarian situation by liaising with the U.N. agencies, NGOs, government authorities, and other international organizations.

18. HAU national staff face a challenging task but are doing a good job, having been told by some NGOs that their presence in NGO vehicles is unwelcome, and some NGOs feel that an embassy vehicle in convoy with theirs may cause undue attention. HAU attempts to gather information on food security and the general humanitarian situation from local authorities have been stymied by the reluctance of officials to be frank and forthcoming with information.

Food Security: Everyone's Concern

19. The GSE declared the 2005 harvest to be the best since 1998, claiming a harvest of 400,000 MT. The government stopped all general food distributions in September, 2005, and stopped targeted food distributions between November 2005 and April 2006. These distributions were implemented by WFP, Mercy Corps and CRS. The three agencies had been feeding approximately 1.3 million beneficiaries, about a third of the Eritrean population. Instead, a FFW scheme was to replace general food distributions. By May 2005, the FFW program had not materialized, and the GSE announced a CFW program that would utilize the 94,000 MT currently in government-controlled warehouses for its own projects, part of a goal to achieve "self-reliance" and reduce dependency on donor aid. (Reftel).

110. The GSE is selling the donor-provided food aid to subsidize its CFW program. Donor food commodities are being sold at government outlets and to businessmen for resale on local markets. WFP reports that donated cereals are being milled in Asmara, repackaged in the same bags, and are being transported to rural markets and urban government shops. NGOs interviewed made similar reports.

111. According to WFP, Eritrea needs about 650,000 MT per year to feed its citizens while only 200,000 to 220,000 are produced locally in the best of times, with the balance provided through commercial imports and donations. With no general food distributions since September of 2005, and an average harvest in 2005, many zobas hit by the region-wide drought earlier this year saw extensive livestock deaths. The failure of the short rains in March, needed for

long-cycle crop germination, the delay in the start of the long rains and seed and fertilizer shortages, are contributing to critical household food shortages. In fact, all UN agencies and NGOs interviewed confirm high food prices, limited food availability at markets, poor terms of trade, poor milk and milk product production, and say they have heard that some families limit food intake to one meal a day. Unfortunately, the lean period will continue through November, with the food security situation only getting worse over the dry summer months ahead.

¶12. Extensive labor shortages due to military and national service requirements have severely affected subsistence farming capacity and family income generating opportunities. In some regions of the country, women headed households are as high as 50 percent due to conscription.

¶13. UNICEF reports increasing malnutrition rates, especially in Gash Barka where a nutrition survey showed global acute malnutrition rates increasing from 17.2 percent in July 2005 to 21 percent in February 2006. Severe acute malnutrition in this region also increased, from 1.3 percent to 2.3 percent. According to UNICEF, the main causes for these high malnutrition rates are inadequate food, low variety in diet, and water shortages. UNICEF anticipates these malnutrition rates will increase in the coming months. Since the government is not conducting post-harvest assessments and household food security surveys, these figures are good proxy indicators of the general food security situation.

Difficult Working Environment

¶14. U.N. agencies and NGOs continue to grapple with operational challenges posed by GSE ministries. Since the MLHW replaced the Eritrean Relief and Refugee Commission (ERREC) in May 2005 as the main government institution responsible for coordinating humanitarian operations, it has not established itself as a responsive counterpart to the humanitarian community. MLHW issued travel passes are required for all NGO expatriates wishing to travel to project locations outside Asmara and work permits are now limited to one expatriate per NGO. U.N. agencies fare slightly better in getting travel and work permits. International employees at all embassies now require MFA permission to travel outside the Asmara city limits. The OFDA RA was granted permission to visit a UNICEF implemented water project in Foro, Northern Red Sea, but was denied travel permission to visit a CRS project site in Debub.

¶15. NGOs cite shortages of qualified workers (due to required national service obligations), travel restrictions, shortages of supplies, equipment and materials, delays in processing imports, delays in processing memoranda of understanding with local authorities and line ministries as major challenges that result in delays in project implementation.

¶16. The GSE's May 2005 NGO Proclamation resulted in about half of the 32 international NGOs being registered and allowed to operate in Eritrea, the balance of NGOs were closed down by the end of 2005. In March 2006, three NGOs that were registered in 2005 were deregistered and asked to cease operations by the MLHW; no reasons were provided. Concern Worldwide and Accord will be closed out by the end of July and Mercy Corps ended all activities and forfeited all assets to the government in June. This has made the tenure of all NGOs uncertain, especially since the NGO Proclamation cites an annual NGO registration process; the remaining local and international NGOs fear being culled in the next round of registration.

Interagency Coordination and the CHAP

¶17. The U.N. Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) has implemented the cluster approach to coordination, with designated U.N. agencies chairing each of six cluster groups that are responsible for identifying humanitarian issues and response plans. Cluster heads are to report to an interagency steering committee (IASC). While the process resulted in the drafting of the common humanitarian action plan (CHAP) which outlines the current

humanitarian situation and projected humanitarian response resource requirements, the IASC has been dormant for the past several months, due in part to the absence of an office chief at OCHA and lack of engagement by the UNDP Humanitarian Coordinator. OCHA has recently appointed a new head of office in Eritrea who will be reactivating the IASC. The CHAP can easily be converted into a consolidated emergency appeal (CAP) if the government allows the U.N. to start the process. Eritrea was included in the regional Horn of Africa CAP, however, donor response for U.N. agency support in Eritrea has been minimal.

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Internally Displaced Persons: uncertain future
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¶18. Approximately 40,000 people remain internally displaced in Eritrea, living in camps in Gash Barka, Debub and Northern Red Sea provinces; unable to return to their homes in the temporary security zone (TSZ) along the disputed border with Ethiopia. In early 2005, the U.N. assisted the government to resettle over 14,000 IDPs in 22 villages in Gash Barka. In recent months, the government has resettled an additional 5,000 IDPs in their home villages in Debub, however, OCHA reports that many are returning to camps due to lack of infrastructure and support services in resettlement areas. A recent U.N. assessment mission (UNICEF, OCHA and UNDP) was deployed to the region and will soon report its findings.

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Water: Continues to be a priority
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¶19. As the long rains are delayed, water availability is becoming increasingly scarce. According to UNICEF and the Water Resource Department of the Ministry of Land, Water and Environment, only about a third of the rural population has access to protected water systems. Water levels in wells and boreholes in lowlands are at an all time low. Women and children are impacted the most, as they are generally tasked with fetching water and are compelled to travel great distances to find it. Most agencies interviewed are implementing water programs, as this is the priority need voiced by all rural communities.

¶20. Sanitation coverage is extremely low, with less than four percent of the rural population having access to sanitation facilities. Subsequently, with each water delivery system that UNICEF rehabilitates or constructs, accompanying sanitation facilities are introduced and sanitation/health education programs are undertaken in local schools.

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Progress of OFDA Funded Projects - UNICEF and CRS
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¶21. The RA visited a USAID/OFDA-funded UNICEF-implemented water program site in Northern Red Sea Zoba. The Foro water project phase-one was completed in February 2005, phase-two is to be completed by the end of the year. It provides water to six villages in addition to Foro town, a total of about 10,000 persons. Water is gravity fed from a spring 15 KM from Foro. Water committees were formed and they have been trained to manage the water resources in their villages. Distribution points are managed locally and residents are charged a nominal fee to cover maintenance costs. UNICEF has an excellent working relationship with both the central and regional water board officers. The project is within national development priorities and has had an immediate impact on both health and livelihoods of the beneficiaries.

¶22. UNICEF plans to expand therapeutic feeding programs in conjunction with the Ministry of Health. It currently supports 42 programs for severely malnourished children throughout the country and plans to open an additional ten feeding centers. It is also planning to pilot community-based therapeutic care (CTC), a feeding strategy that will provide ready-to-use therapeutic food to children on an out-patient basis.

¶23. CRS' USAID/OFDA funded Agriculture and Livelihood Program commenced after the start of the long rainy season in 2005, thus was unable to provide farmers with seeds for the main cropping season.

CRS was given a no-cost extension until the end of June 2006 providing 10,000 farm families with seeds and plowing services in Debub and Maekel Zobas. CRS was awarded a cost extension by OFDA in June 2006, targeting an additional 4,000 farm families with seeds and plowing services for the main cropping season. The OFDA RA was unable to observe a CRS supported seed fair in Debub due to GSE travel restrictions.

Conclusions and Recommendations

¶24. Many of the overall problems in Eritrea stem from chronic poverty and vulnerability and are exacerbated by questionable government relief policies and responses to food insecurity. About half of the population is unable to produce or obtain sufficient food while less than a third of the rural population has access to potable water. Food insecurity is exacerbated by chronic drought conditions in the Sahel, resulting in crop failures, exorbitant grain prices, livestock losses and asset depletion furthering the downward spiral of vulnerable people into abject poverty and destitution.

¶25. While the GSE has downplayed the need for development assistance programs, it has created an extremely difficult and antagonistic working environment for many U.N. agencies and NGOs which could respond to the looming humanitarian crisis.

¶26. The failure of the December coastal rains, needed to replenish pasture and water tables, resulted in large numbers of livestock deaths and reverse migration of pastoralists and livestock to highlands which further stressed the population in those regions. The absence of the short rains in March resulted in poor long cycle crop germination. The delayed onset of the long rains for the main cropping season, shortages of seed and fertilizer, and the lack of food relief during these lean months prior to the next harvest are contributing factors to extensive food insecurity. Malnutrition rates are increasing, food prices are skyrocketing while many households are already limiting food intake to one meal a day, indicators show that the food security situation is deteriorating. Responses by the government, such as stopping all food aid distributions, initiating a hastily implemented CFW scheme and the monetization of food aid are inadequate and inappropriate interventions.

¶27. Depending on the availability of funds, the OFDA RA recommends priority consideration to the following sectors: (1) water source rehabilitation focusing on drought stricken areas as well as water related livelihood interventions (irrigation schemes); (2) short-term agriculture support activities, including the provision of seeds and other farm inputs and interventions addressing livelihood support; and (3) support for emergency health and nutrition interventions. In addition, the OFDA RA recommends support to OCHA to enable greater coordination between humanitarian actors and the government.

¶28. OFDA also recommends a follow-up review of the humanitarian situation in mid-2006 by OFDA agriculture and health/nutrition specialists to determine agriculture, livelihood, health and nutrition sector needs, and to reassess the operating climate and humanitarian and food security situation.

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